



ELSAH HISTORY

Number One

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About Historic Elsah

Historic Elsah Foundation has had a long beginning, first as a garden club, then, finding its direction in the preservation and enhancement of the historic qualities of the village, as Historic Elsah. In that phase, there was a period of hesitation, during which it was found that meetings did not attract members, who were busy with many other activities. An opportunity for an annual house tour was missed, during the summer of 1970, because of the involvement of members in other projects.

But the need for an organization was too apparent to allow the idea to lie fallow for long, and during the winter of 1970-71, a revision of the organization was designed by a group of interested members. As a result, this past summer "Foundation" was added to our name, and we became a not for profit corporation under Illinois law. Currently we are applying to the IRS for status as an organization contributions to which are tax deductible. We hope this will come about in the near future. Our acceptance as such an organization depends in part on the predominance of our educational activities, of which this newsletter is one.

In a meeting in August, the following directors were appointed: Alma Barnes, Edith Belote, Cyrus A. Bunting, Josephine Copeland, Pat Farmer, Charles Hosmer, Inge Mack, Barbara Swett, and Paul Williams. An attempt was made to draw directors from various groups with an interest in the village, and this balance will be maintained, and we hope improved, at such time as directors are replaced. For the first year, Charles Hosmer will act as president, Paul Williams as vice president and editor, Edith Belote as secretary, and Jo Copeland as treasurer. Members wishing to read the by-laws or articles of incorporation may apply to any of the directors to do so.

What the future holds is not yet clear, and will depend both on our dedication and the amount of support we are able to muster. There is much to do.

Elsah is an unusual historic community, abounding with educational opportunities, and in places badly in need of preservation.

As it turns out, our new headquarters is also our first preservation project. Since the village government has moved its headquarters to the old Elsah school, which has been renamed the Village of Elsah Civic Center, the Village Hall has been made available for lease on extremely generous terms. But we are also responsible for its upkeep, and must take this assignment very seriously. The Hall is one of those buildings absolutely necessary to the historic appearance of the village. And it needs much restoration, including (with Village Board approval) straightening, bracing, reroofing, resheathing, painting, rewiring, and work on the interior. To accomplish this work, we will need much support.

We have already consulted with an architect well versed in preservation projects, and have gained from him a much clearer idea of what needs to be done. Right now, we are inquiring into the costs of the work.

We hope that our program is not all work or all education. The annual Christmas party, which has proved to be such a success in the past, will be continued. We are also planning slide shows, an old movie night, and an annual historic trip. We hope that previous members will respond to our new call for annual dues, and that many new members will join with us. Dues are still \$2 per year for individuals, \$3 for families. Sustaining memberships are \$10 or more. While the newsletter is included with individual and family memberships, sustaining members are also given free all leaflets published. A form for joining or renewing will be found inserted in this newsletter. It can be sent with dues to P. O. Box 117, Elsah, Illinois, 62028, or given to any of the directors. Please join with us. We need everyone's support.

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Elsah Quarry

As part of its new oral history program, HEF is interviewing elder Elsah citizens about their experiences in its history. The first to appear in a newsletter is one with Dewey McDow, who was born and raised in Elsah, who built the bungalow he still lives in, in Elsah, in the early 20's, and who is in retirement after many years work on the railroad. The Western Whiting Mill operated a quarry in Elsah from 1903 to 1928. Mr. McDow worked there during the earlier years of its operation, and gives his recollections in the following interview:

Interviewer: Did you ever work in the Elsah quarry?

Mr. McDow: Yes, sir.

Int.: When was that?

D. M.: We did that work when we was kids going to school in the summertime. Didn't have nothing to do. In summertime in them days there was nothing to do.

Int.: What did you do?

D. M.: Break rocks with a sledge hammer.

Int.: That's hot work.

D. M.: Yeah. We got fifteen cents an hour for it. Ten hours a day. A dollar and a half a day. I fired two boilers down there. Had about five or six engines on them, twelve hours a night for two dollars. Two big boilers. You had your head in the fire box all night long to keep them going.

Int.: Did you use coal?

D. M.: Yeah, coal.

Int.: Did that come on the railroad or by river?

D. M.: Shipped it in on the railroad. Slack coal.

Yes, sir.

Int.: I've heard that Walter Cresswell worked there.

D. M.: He was foreman in the quarry there.

Int.: Do you remember anything about blasting down there?

D. M.: Yes. Willie Rister used to run that steam drill for years, he did. Bring the bits up here to the blacksmith shop and sharpen them. The drill bits.

Int.: Was that Tonkinson's?

D. M.: Tonkinson's blacksmith shop.

Int.: He had charge of the blasting?

D. M.: Willie Rister drilled the holes and Walter Cresswell loaded them. Put dynamite down there. Some they lit the fuses, and some they used batteries. Pull a battery up and let it go.

Int.: I bet that made a roar.

D. M.: Yeah. It sure did. I've seen it throw rocks right over the top of this hill over here in the early days.

Int.: Did they ever hit anything with them?

D. M.: No. They never hit anything that I know of. They'd come over here and light in the streets or some-

thing like that.

Int.: How'd the people like that?

D. M.: Well, they couldn't do nothing about it. In them days they was working there for a living. You know. Nothing else to do in them days. You know a dollar and a half a day was a lot of money in them days. Fifty years ago.

Int.: How often did they blast?

D. M.: Two or three times a day. Have some great big rocks three or four times bigger than that stove, and put two or three sticks of dynamite on there and put some mud on top of it, then put a fuse on it, and light her off and get away. Maybe ten or fifteen at a time. Somebody would just touch a match to it and light it and that powder would go right down to it. Give you a chance. The fuse was made to burn a foot a minute, or something like that.

Int.: How did they do the drilling?

D. M.: They'd start from the top and work down, then shoot off eighteen feet or so at a time. You've seen where those trees are growing halfway up the side of the quarry? Well, that's where they stopped when they quit working.

Int.: Then the drill bits were eighteen feet long?

D. M.: No, they'd start off with a short one, you see, then when it run out they'd take it off and put a longer one in, you see. Then they'd shoot off a ledge, maybe ten foot back—shoot it right off. In Grafton, at one time they drilled by hand. Just stand there and keep turning, put a little water in, and turn.

Int.: Did they use a machine in Elsah?

D. M.: Oh, yes. They had a steam drill here. Pipe steam up on the top of that bluff. Then when air come in they had one of these air hammers.

Int.: Then you broke up the smaller pieces with a sledge hammer?

D. M.: Yeah. Until they were about the size of a loaf of bread. If they were too big they wouldn't go through the crusher.

Int.: Did that crush them into powder?

D. M.: No, just crush it into gravel. Then they'd run it through a big screen and different sizes would go in different bins. They had dust, then quarter inch, half inch, and three quarters. They used it for concrete, just the way they do the rock from Grafton quarry today. Just crushed it the same way. There was too much flint in it, though. Flint don't make good concrete, you know.

Int.: So that helped to close down the quarry?

D. M.: Yes, that's right. The state wouldn't pass it.

Int.: Did they make whitewash with it?

D. M.: Well, they made whiting, or putty, out of it, and stuff like that. And that was all shipped out on the railroad.

Int.: Did they ship any at all on the river?

D. M.: No.

Int.: Were most of the men that worked in the quarry from Elsah?

D. M.: Everybody was from Elsah.

Int.: Did any men move to Elsah to work there?

D. M.: Ch, yeah, everybody moved here because it

was handy and they had no roads in here, really, in them days.

Int.: Then they moved out when the quarry closed?

D.M.: Yeah. Some of them did. Some worked at Grafton or around Grafton. You know there was no-

thing to do here then.

Int.: Thank you very much for talking with me about the old days in the quarry.

D.M.: You're welcome.



Elsah workers pose in the quarry. The quarry building in the background was originally built as the Knapp and Goodrich flour mill in 1857. Later it was the home of Enos Doron's celebrated Silver Moon flour before being converted for quarry uses by the Western Whiting Company. Picture courtesy of Mrs. Walter Cresswell.

News Notes

Log Cabin Uncovered

The construction of apartments at the far end of the Elsah Hills subdivision has resulted in the taking down of an old white frame house in bad condition behind the apartment site. The razing process revealed that inside the walls of one section of the house was a log cabin, which formed a core structure around which, as is so often the case in the rural midwest, the rest of the structure was built. It formed an interior of fourteen by sixteen feet, and was built over a native stone basement still in good condition. The brick and stone arch over the basement stairway was in fine shape. Almost all the logs were oak, both white and black. One short one was sycamore. Although the logs were squared, fitted, and pegged, some bark still adhered to the horizontal edges. Carol Belden, owner of the structure, has given HEF a log, with pegs in place, as an item for our museum. Initial speculation puts the age of the cabin at considerably more than a hundred years. Further investigations will be reported in our next newsletter.

A Course Involving Elsah

A half course project in research and writing local history, using Elsah as its material, will be offered for the first time this fall at Principia College. This will provide students a chance to do original research, which might lead to publication; will teach research techniques, and will incidentally greatly speed the rate at which new information about Elsah is uncovered. The present instructor is Paul Williams. With continued interest, the course will be offered each quarter.

A Gift to HEF

The Elsah Volunteer Emergency Corps was recently disbanded, their work now being taken over by the emergency corps of Alton and Grafton, and by the Quarry-Elsah Volunteer Firefighters' Association. In closing out their funds, the Emergency Corps donated to several organizations, including Historic Elsah Foundation, which received a check for \$55.63. We are very grateful for this gift, which has been put toward the publication of this newsletter.

Publications Planned

Elsah History, the newsletter of Historic Elsah Foundation, gets underway with this issue. It will appear four times a year, with occasional supplements, and will contain news and information of the organization, as well as short historical articles about the area and reprinted materials.

In addition, leaflets are planned. These will be issued as conditions permit. They will be of no predetermined size, but will take their dimensions from the subject they cover. Thus they may range from a folded sheet of four pages to a considerable pamphlet. It is hoped that they will provide a continual flow of new information on subjects related to the past of the Elsah area. Leaflets will be free to sustaining members.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Mr. W. Philip Cotton for advice on the restoration of the Village Hall. We are also grateful to James Schmidt for the design which heads the first page of this newsletter, and which we will use elsewhere as a symbol of the organization. Thanks also are due to Gene Shultz for printing the newsletter, and for the many valuable suggestions he made in the process.

Elsah in California

This past summer, Charles Hosmer had the opportunity to interview Mr. Byron Brock in Vallejo, California. Mr. Brock was born in the Brock-Belote house, on LaSalle Street, Elsah, in 1893. His family moved to Washington when he was four, and returned in 1904 for a visit. Although Mr. Brock has not seen Elsah since, his memories of the area were vivid as recorded on tape for our oral history collection. He also had some old Elsah pictures, which he allowed us to copy. One especially, of the waterfront, is a valuable document.

Another Elsah native now living in California is Mrs. Beulah Carpenter, granddaughter of Elsah's diarist and inventor, William McNair. She has given much valuable information and pictures of Elsah's past.

Koster Site

Under the direction of Professor Stuart Struever, of Northwestern University, the Koster expedition, working near Eldred, Illinois, has progressed greatly this past summer, its second full summer of operation. Since the dig is only about a forty-five minute drive from Elsah, it is a good place to visit during the summer—next summer now.

The Foundation for Illinois Archaeology has been based in Kampsville for several years. A growing organization, it promises to enhance greatly the archaeological knowledge of the area. At Kampsville, a museum open to the public, as well as four field labs,

constitute a considerable part of the activity in the town each summer.

Professor Struever welcomes visitors and provides guides for them at the Koster site. The foundation also welcomes and needs financial support from interested citizens. As the most intense probing into the prehistoric past in our area, it certainly deserves the aid of all who would preserve our history. Friends of the Koster Expedition receive newsletters about the progress of the dig.

During the winter months, the Kampsville archaeological museum has been transferred to Carrollton, under the auspices of the local chamber of commerce. It may be visited there.

Museum Planned

The Village of Elsah is planning to use the former upper room of the Elsah School, now part of the Village of Elsah Civic Center, as a museum for materials of historical interest relating to Elsah's past.

The new Civic Center is now being refurbished and repainted. On volunteer Saturdays, complete with a fish fry, a number of villagers contributed their time and muscle in interior painting and cleaning up. Our picture below shows Mayor Edward Keller puttying in the upper room in preparation for painting.

